

Standards for Teacher Evaluation Mulled

By Stephen Sawchuk

With the pressure on to increase student learning, two states are in the process of overhauling what analysts say is among the most neglected pieces of the teacher-quality continuum: evaluation.

Both Georgia and Idaho are working to help districts institute performance-based teacher evaluations built on clear descriptions of effective teaching practices.

Neither state plans to require districts to use a specific evaluation instrument. Instead, officials expect the performance-based standards to improve consistency.

"There's a desire among educators and policymakers to have consistent standards across the state," Tom Luna, Idaho's superintendent

of schools, said in an interview. "If what a teacher is doing is determined to be good teaching in Boise, it should also be considered good teaching in Twin Falls."

The process inevitably raises difficult questions. Policy experts, nevertheless, say the state momentum is overdue.

"It's a logical and a belated step," Thomas Toch, the co-director of the Washington-based research group Education Sector, said about the state activity. "It's hard to believe that an industry that spends what we estimate to be \$400 billion a year on teacher pay and benefits has such a flawed system of measuring the return on its investment."

Mr. Toch, the co-author of a 2008 report on the state of teacher eval-

uations, contends that most evaluations are cursory and based on criteria that do not correlate with student achievement.

Teachers report similar stories, said a member of Idaho's teacher-evaluation task force.

"I've been evaluated on a field trip to the farm. I've been evaluated when I was helping renovate the [playground] and was putting down new chip bark," quipped Sherri Wood, the president of the Idaho Education Association and a 28-year teaching veteran.

A New Model

The lack of consistency within states appears at least in part to be due to a dearth of guidance.

In Georgia, teacher evaluation

using the existing voluntary state model hinges primarily on each evaluator's interpretation rather than clear standards, said Barbara Lunsford, the state manager for leader quality.

Aside from the arbitrariness, most evaluations are never used to help teachers improve their practice, according to Charlotte Danielson, a consultant on performance-based teacher evaluation. "Teacher evaluation is just something that everybody endures," she said.

Performance-based evaluation frameworks, by contrast, are built on standards of teacher behavior that research links to improved student learning.

Each standard typically includes a description of the practice and ex-

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Award Recognizes W.Va.'s Web Portal

West Virginia's comprehensive—and clutter-free—education Web portal has won an award from a group that provides consulting services on educational information technology.

The site, which can be accessed through www.wv.gov/education, provides a central source of information on K-12 education, community colleges, four-year colleges, and adult education in West Virginia.

It also provides resources for job seekers, such as a "career matching assistant" questionnaire and information on completing General Educational Development tests.

That combination of information all under one "roof" made the Web site stand out, said Marina Leight, the vice president for education for the Center for Digital Education.

"They were pulling in different resources from all around the state," said Ms. Leight, whose organization is a division of e.Republic Inc., based in Folsom, Calif.

The redesigned state Web site, up since May, won both the organization's 2008 Digital Education Achievement Award and a Best of the Web Special Award.

Ms. Leight said her organization was also impressed with how West Virginia included job resources. Too often, such explicit connections are a missing element from education Web sites, she said.

"It's critical that initiatives like this are taking place, because the Web is where everyone is going for information," Ms. Leight said.

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Kyle Schafer, the chief technology officer for West Virginia, said the 4-month-old revamped Web site grew out of the work of the 21st Century Jobs Council, a consortium of education and business leaders from around the state.

"We hope that for the general public, when they go out to look for a very specific thing, they're going to see that there are other opportunities out there," he said.

Through the state's main Web site, visitors ultimately can reach 900 different educational resources, Mr. Schafer said.

As the site evolves, he added, it will also include more career-recruitment information. —CHRISTINA A. SAMUELS

Texas Move to Tighten GPA Formula Sparks Backlash

Some fear proposal would discourage students from taking rigorous classes

By Catherine Gewertz

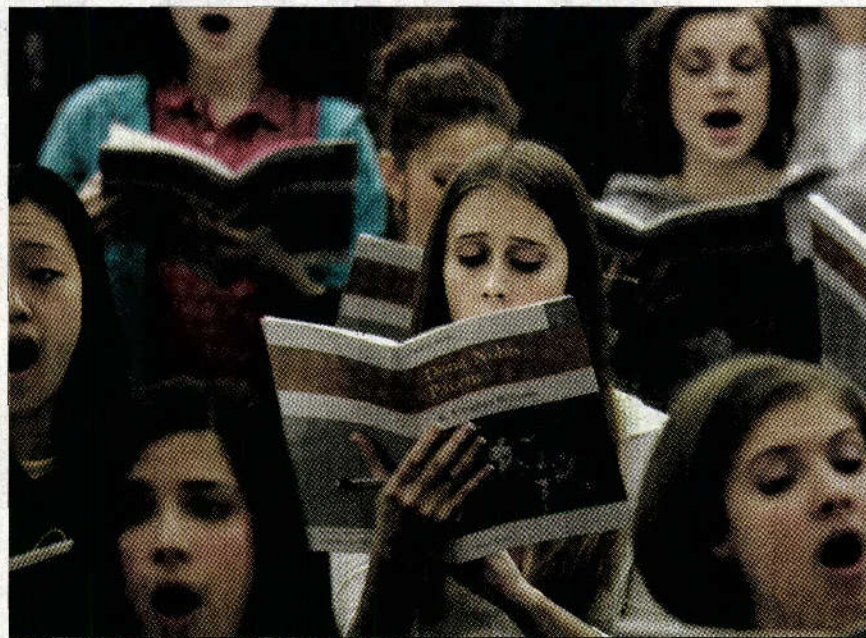
Texas is working on a formula that all high schools would have to use to calculate students' grade point averages. But it is encountering strong resistance from educators who fear it could discourage teenagers from taking challenging courses.

The Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, which oversees public colleges and universities, is expected to vote on the proposed rule at its Oct. 23 meeting. But the public-comment period leading up to the decision has been rife with opposition.

Raymund A. Paredes, the state's commissioner of higher education, is leading the development of the new rule. He is responding to a law passed in June 2007 by the state legislature, which directed the board to develop a single formula for calculating high school GPAs "to ensure a uniform standard for admissions" by public colleges and universities.

His response is also designed to promote rigor in high school coursework. But critics question whether it will.

The proposal would require schools to compute GPAs by including only courses in English language arts, mathematics, science, social studies, and foreign languages. Grade point averages would have to be calculated on a four-point scale, with an extra point given only for Advanced Placement, International Bac-



The grades Texas students earn in music and other elective courses would not count in their grade point averages under a proposal to create a statewide formula for calculating GPAs. These students at Martin High School in Arlington, Texas, are shown in a 2006 rehearsal.

Brad Loper/Dallas Morning News-File 2006

calaureate, and dual-enrollment courses, which can permit college credit.

If adopted, the new rule would affect students who will be freshmen in the fall of 2009.

Experts who track high school policy said Texas could be breaking new ground in GPA calculation. Jennifer Dounay, the analyst who oversees the High School Policy Center at the Denver-based Education Commission of the States, said some states require that extra weight be given to honors, AP, IB, or dual-enrollment courses, but none go beyond that.

If adopted, Texas' rule would force a significant change in many districts, which give added weight to honors, "pre-AP" and "pre-IB" courses. In those schools, a student who earns an A in honors English, for instance, gets five points factored into the GPA. Under the new method, that A would be worth only four points.

The proposal would also mean that a vast array of courses—from theater to career and technical education—would not count in a student's GPA.

Admission Yardstick

A lot rides on the change in Texas, where a 1997 law guaranteed admission to state universities for students who rank in the top 10 percent of their graduating class. Rank is dictated by students' GPAs.

Mr. Paredes argues that honors, pre-AP and pre-IB courses should not get extra weight because their content and rigor vary from district to district and even from school to school.

The extra point in AP, IB, and dual-credit courses offers an incentive for students to try college-level work, he said. Allowing students to boost their GPAs with courses of questionable rigor un-

dermines the larger goal of ensuring they are prepared for college and work, he said.

"I get concerned when families or school districts are more interested in pumping up grade point averages without making sure students receive the appropriate level of rigor," he said in an interview last week.

Michael K. Orr, the associate director of college and school relations for the 48,000-student University of Texas at Austin, said the GPA has limited value in admission because it can only show how a student compares with others at a particular school. Using a uniform method could create "a common standard of measurement of success in high school" that could show how a student stacks up to those in other schools, he said.

Some educators worry, however, that removing extra grade weight

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Ga., Idaho Move Toward Performance-Based Reviews

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amples of the evidence, such as lesson plans and student work, that evaluators are expected to seek in making judgments about teacher attainment of the standard.

Finally, they describe ascending levels of teacher performance based on the evidence collected.

Ms. Danielson's model is one of the best-known and widely adopted examples. It incorporates standards across four domains: instruction, classroom environment, professional responsibilities, and planning and preparation.

The benefits of evaluating teachers against such a framework are not only that evaluators can give teachers specific feedback on their instructional successes and areas needing work, but also that they essentially become a form of professional development that helps teachers, over time, analyze their cognitive decisionmaking, Ms. Danielson said.

"It's very rewarding to engage in conversations with a teacher about those decisions," she said. "It becomes a kind of problem-solving exercise, not just a judgment."

Scaling Up

To scale up better evaluations, states need to take the lead role in setting and enforcing minimum teacher-performance standards, said Sandi Jacobs, the state-policy director for the National Council on Teacher Quality, a Washington-based group that promotes improvement in the profession.

Only 16 states set specific guidelines on evaluations, according to the council's most recent tally.

"Multiple data points, a combination of observation and more-objective data—these things definitely matter," Ms. Jacobs said. "And the idea that these kinds of policies are incompatible with local decision-making really isn't so."

Idaho is proof positive of that maxim. A longtime bastion of local control, the state until recently had little oversight of teacher evaluations aside from requiring districts

Evaluating Teachers

To judge whether teachers in Georgia plan instruction that reflects strong knowledge of both content and effective instructional delivery, evaluators look for evidence in their lesson plans and curriculum units. Evaluators can rate teachers' practices on four levels.

Not Evident	Emerging	Proficient	Exemplary
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Covers content superficially in lesson plans. ■ Identifies material to be covered by the teacher, but rarely thinks about how students will learn it. ■ Provides no opportunities for students to engage creatively with content either independently or with peers. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Strives to design plans to help students grasp both factual knowledge and to make sense of and use content knowledge. ■ Creates strategies that will engage students in content, but strategies are isolated and/or may lack coherence or depth across lessons. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Provides a rich content base in all plans, including major concepts and assumptions as well as facts. ■ Designs opportunities for students to learn content in ways that support their learning styles, multiple intelligences, etc. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Encourages students to debate issues in the content area(s). ■ Engages student in active learning through exploration and hands-on learning through projects, inquiry processes, and the use of technology like those used by professionals in the field. ■ Anticipates common misconceptions and makes modifications before the lesson or unit to address student needs.

SOURCE: Georgia Department of Education

to perform them once a year.

The notion of a uniform standard gained traction this year during legislative debate over proposed merit pay. That plan failed in the legislature, in part because teachers did not feel that districts had a consistent basis for evaluating effective teaching, said state schools Superintendent Luna.

The legislature then set up a task force to examine the issue and make recommendations by next year. The 22-member body has settled on Ms. Danielson's framework as a foundation, Mr. Luna said.

Though its recommendations are still in the draft stage, the task force plans to require districts to align their evaluation instruments with the Danielson framework's four domains. Beyond that, districts will be able to tailor the evaluation to their own needs, Mr. Luna said.

Georgia, unlike Idaho, has typically had stronger state control over education.

Considered innovative when first crafted in 2000, Georgia's

voluntary instrument was not aligned with the post-No Child Left Behind Act, standards-based classroom, said Ms. Lunsford, the manager of leader quality.

The new program, now being piloted in 180 schools, focuses on five "strands" similar to those in Ms. Danielson's model. For each standard, teachers are scored on a four-tiered scale that represents growth over time, Ms. Lunsford said.

In one significant departure from the Danielson model, the Georgia program requires teachers to produce evidence of student-learning gains. It will leave it to districts and administrators to determine whether to base that evidence on test scores or other factors.

Both the Idaho standards and the new Georgia model require at least two full-period observations for new teachers, as well as pre- and post-evaluation conferences between teacher and evaluator. The systems, in effect, require a commitment by administrators to spend more time in classrooms, and hinge on training for the

users of the new instruments.

Georgia's new instrument comes with two days of training in which evaluators assess practices through videos and exercises.

The cost and provision of training in Idaho has not yet been fully settled, to the worry of the state teachers' union.

"A more standardized state form won't change anything unless there is training of teachers to understand the new form and the new way of being evaluated, and administrators are helped to use the new tool," Ms. Wood said.

Several observers, such as Mr. Toch of Education Sector, have recommended that states train a corps of retired teachers, central-office personnel, and other officials to help principals with evaluations. The additional feedback would help increase the reliability of evaluations, he said.



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Neither Georgia or Idaho has set policy to that end, state officials said, although Idaho is toying with the idea of allowing teachers to be evaluated by administrators outside of their schools.

Dismissing Teachers

One long-standing tension lingers in the new performance-based evaluations' purpose: They are tools primarily meant to establish paths for teacher improvement, but for the weakest teachers, they can also contribute to dismissal.

In Idaho's draft policy, for instance, teachers whose performance falls short in two of the four domains—or whose performance falls short in the same domain on two successive evaluations—will be deemed unsatisfactory.

The state role in teacher dismissal as a whole is one area of concern to Ms. Danielson, who doesn't want it to trump the focus on sustained improvement.

"I just hope states are not completely motivated by the bad-apple impulses of the legislators," Ms. Danielson said. "I'm not terribly optimistic about that, frankly."

In Georgia, Ms. Lunsford said, evaluators are sensitive that few teachers are likely to score at the "exemplary" level for every component.

At a training session last week, she recounted, one 20-year veteran noted that her own teaching practices would be considered "emerging"—the second-lowest level out of four—on several of the new system's subcomponents.

"Our response was, 'That's fine—you're not teaching the same way you were 20 years ago,'" Ms. Lunsford said. "A lot has changed."

Coverage of policy efforts to improve the teaching profession is supported by a grant from the Joyce Foundation.

Texas Proposal on GPAs Draws Educator Concerns

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for honors, pre-AP, and pre-IB courses will encourage students to avoid challenging themselves.

"These are 14- and 15-year-old kids. They take the easy track if it's given to them," said Cathy Bryce, the superintendent of the 6,300-student Highland Park Independent school district on Dallas' northern edge. "How can I say, 'Go ahead and take this, I know it's harder, so you will probably get a worse grade, and you won't have the advantage of added

weight for your GPA, either.'"

Ms. Bryce worries that the policy undermines an important goal.

"The kids who take the easier track as freshmen and sophomores can get by easier and collect good grades. So we won't have as many completing the rigorous tracks that make them better prepared for college," she said. "Then we're creating classes of kids that won't be as likely to do well in college or complete it. It's cutting off your nose to spite your face."

Local-Control Issue

Jacqueline Lain, the chief lobbyist for the Texas Association of School Boards, said many districts see the uniform GPA as an interference.

"School districts would prefer to have local control so they can incentivize kids to take courses their community feels are important for the students' development," she said.

One of the most widespread concerns about the proposed GPA rule is the elimination of career and technical education courses from the calculation.

Patty Quinzi, the legislative counsel for the Texas AFT, a 57,000-member state affiliate of the American Federation of Teachers, said the policy creates

the "perverse incentive" of discouraging students from taking challenging courses that not only build academic skills, but prepare them for successful careers.

She cited a course at one high school that is team-taught by auto-shop and math teachers, in which students were applying calculus principles to auto mechanics, and an internship that allows students to build components for the National Aeronautics and Space Administration.

"Ultimately, we are concerned with kids being career-ready, not just college-ready," Ms. Quinzi said. "If the Higher Education Coordinating Board is not going to respect courses like this as core courses with strong substance, kids are never going to want to take them."

She said the AFT is also concerned that excluding courses such as music from GPA calculations will make disengaged students even less inclined to show up. "Sometimes, courses like music are the only reason those kids come to school," she said.

Mr. Paredes said he is still "tweaking" the list of courses he will recommend for inclusion in the GPA calculation. He said he will consider a wide range of courses, from Advanced Placement art to high-technology, and recommend for inclusion those that prepare students for university study.



Links to information about Texas' proposed rules for a uniform grading policy are provided at edweek.org/links.



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SOURCE: Educ Week 28 no6 O 1 2008

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